

Southeast Asian media action needed to communicate climate change

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October 22, 2017

THE gloom-and-doom scenario of climate change continues to persist even with the availability of unshared scientific innovations by end users, especially farmers, in mitigating and adapting them. How can institutions mobilize the media as a powerful partner in communication and engagement to respond to this worldwide issue?

“There is an urgent need for media practitioners,” said Dr. Rex Navarro of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CGIAR CCAFS) Program at the recently held Asian Media Information and Communication Inc. (Amic), “to have an accurate, science-based understanding of climate change and enhance their skills on environmental reporting.”

“The media is a powerful partner in bringing about wider public awareness and understanding of climate-change science and in helping change the behavior of next users, so its engagement must be a sustained process,” Dr. Navarro said in his paper, “Mobilizing Science for Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security: Engaging the Southeast Asian Media.”

Already, climate change is threatening the resurgence of Asia, including challenges characterized by “inequalities, conflicts, unsustainable practices, and corruption,” the Amic stressed. Senior consultant Julian Gonsalves of the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction noted that “inequality is an issue that is glossed over by most climate-change folks and rarely a subject of emphasis.”

Gonsalves, like his colleagues at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), is time and again advocating the use of climate-smart agriculture (CSA) to reduce gaps created by past approaches that exacerbated the situation of the poor. It's a new chance to be pro-poor.”

Understandably, the existing partnerships of CGIAR CCAFS around the world, especially with the national agricultural research systems (NARS) in Southeast Asia, suffer from miniscule media treatment of climate change unless a super typhoon like Yolanda in the Philippines, hurricanes Harvey and Irma in the United States or long-term drought in Africa take their devastating toll on human lives and food security.

Hindering factors

Reporting climate change by the media is rooted on several factors, such as lack of training to make climate change relevant and interesting, complex jargon, lack of access to specialist knowledge in some developing countries, much of the science is Western and written in English, and lack of resources to travel outside city centers to gather first-hand evidence and testimony or to attend international climate conferences.

Also by journalists' admission, climate-change stories get “pigeon-holed” or dismissed as “environment stories,” when, in fact, such stories have far-reaching implications for energy policy, food security, economic development, poverty alleviation, international relations and technological initiatives, among others. Australian Climate Commissioner Will Steffen noted that “communicating the observed and potential consequences of climate change is a challenging task, one that is often done poorly in the media.”

No scaremongering

“How the media communicates risk and uncertainty to their audiences is a critical issue. It is vitally important that the public are aware of the risks associated with

unmanaged climate change.... The media need to convey this information clearly and accurately without resorting to scaremongering,” warned Lord Nicholas Stern, chairman of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Regional engagement

A distinct Asian communication strategy, which is now addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate change, is being implemented by the CGIAR CCAFS in collaboration with NARS and national media partners through seminars focused on science innovations on climate change, agriculture and food security and communicating climate change.

The CGIAR CCAFS have so far completed six media seminar-workshops in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and the Philippines. Among country-specific topics discussed during these seminars included farmer-oriented technologies responding to climate impacts (Cambodia), improving the resilience of the agriculture sector to climate change impacts (Laos), forests for people and thinking beyond the canopy (Vietnam), and mainstreaming climate change in agriculture (Philippines).

On the other hand, the regional media seminar-workshops in the Philippines are being done to localize climate-change issues related to agriculture and food security. These are aimed at enhancing the reporting skills of journalists and sustaining the media coverage of contemporary climate-change issues that will influence policy-makers and key stakeholders.

Climate change: ‘Gets mo na ba?’

An excellent example of this collective endeavor is CCAFS’s partnership with the Philippine Agricultural Journalists Inc. (PAJ) in association with the Department of Agriculture through its regional field offices, Philippine Federation of Rural Broadcasters, IRRI and private business establishments, such as San Miguel Cor. Metro Pacific Investments Corp., Philex Mining Corp., Smart and SL Agritech.

Until recently, the themes “Climate change: Gets mo na ba?” and “Climate change; Maawatanyon” in the seminar-workshop series held by the PAJ-CCAFS in Legaspi City, Tacloban City, Siargao Island, Cagayan, Ilocos Sur and soon in Alaminos, Pangasinan, is a binding review mechanism and point to the fierce urgency in connecting the dots, through the media, in confronting climate change in order to achieve food security, sustainable economic growth, sound environmental stewardship and strengthened governance in the Philippines, Southeast Asian region and the rest of the world.

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